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ABSTRACT

Previous laboratory research has found that self-disclosure by a speaker identified as a political officeholder results in a decrease in persuasiveness, whereas similar disclosure by nonofficials increases persuasiveness. Two experiments were conducted to examine this effect further. In experiment 1, subjects were 75 male and 77 female undergraduates in an introductory psychology course who received credit for participation in the study. Subjects read a speech and completed a questionnaire concerning the persuasiveness of the speech. Results indicated that the decreased persuasion effect was found for speakers identified as either a male or female officeholder. In experiment 2, a control condition was added in which subjects heard about the disclosed information without actual exposure to the disclosure. Subjects in this condition, 47 male and 72 female undergraduate students, found the officeholder more persuasive than did subjects exposed to the self-disclosure. Thus, the act of disclosing itself, rather than the information obtained from the disclosure, appears to be responsible for the effect. (Contains nine references and two tables of data.) (RS)

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Self-Disclosure and Decreased Persuasiveness of Political Speakers

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Running Head: SELF-DISCLOSURE AND DECREASED PERSUASIVENESS

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Abstract

Previous laboratory research has found that self-disclosure by a speaker identified as a political officeholder results in a decrease in persuasiveness, whereas similar disclosure by nonofficials increases persuasiveness. Two experiments were conducted to examine this effect further. In Experiment 1, the decreased persuasion effect was found for speakers identified as either a male or a female officeholder. In Experiment 2, a control condition was added in which subjects heard about the disclosed information without actual exposure to the disclosure. Subjects in this condition found the officeholder more persuasive than did subjects exposed to the self-disclosure. Thus, the act of disclosing itself, rather than the information obtained from the disclosure, appears to be responsible for the effect.

Self-Disclosure and Decreased Persuasiveness of Political Speakers

For many years rhetorical critics have been interested in understanding how the individual styles of prominent public speakers affect that person's ability to persuade audiences. One interesting case study is former president Richard Nixon's frequent use of self-disclosure when delivering a persuasive speech (Rosenfield, 1968; Vartabedian, 1981). It has been suggested by these rhetorical critics that Nixon's discussions of his personal life during these speeches ultimately resulted in a decrease in his effectiveness as a speaker.

Burger and Vartabedian (1985) examined this phenomenon in two laboratory investigations. Undergraduates were presented with a videotape of a persuasive speech delivered by a male speaker. Half of the subjects saw a version of the speech in which the speaker describes a series of tragic events that struck his family. The other half saw a version in which the same story is told about an anonymous family the speaker heard about. Some of the subjects were told that the speaker was a member of an oratory club, and some were told that he was a member of the U. S. House of Representatives. It was found that the use of self-

disclosure increased the persuasiveness of the club member's speech, but, consistent with the analysis of the rhetorical critics, decreased the persuasiveness of the congressman's presentation. The investigators argue that the congressman's self-disclosure was detrimental because such behavior is seen as inappropriate for a person in such a position.

Although demonstrating the reduced persuasion with self-disclosure effect for political officeholders, as described by the rhetorical critics, the Burger and Vartabedian (1985) studies, like most laboratory investigations, also generate questions about the parameters and reasons for the effect. Two of those questions will be addressed in the research presented here. First, the generalizability of these findings to female political speakers will be examined. Second, an alternative explanation for the effect, that the additional information about the speaker and not the disclosure itself is responsible for the effect, will be examined.

Experiment 1

Burger and Vartabedian (1985) speculate that the reason self-disclosure by political officials results in a reduction in persuasiveness is that such behavior is seen as inappropriate for the officeholder. However,

the videotape used in this research was of a male speaker. It is not clear, therefore, if self-disclosure by a female political officeholder also would be seen as inappropriate and thus also lead to a decrease in persuasiveness.

Research on self-disclosure in interpersonal situations suggests that different norms exist for males' and females' self-disclosing behavior. Derlega and Chaikin (1976), for example, found that males who disclosed personal information in an interview were judged to be less well-adjusted than males who disclosed very little. The opposite pattern was found for females, who were seen as more well-adjusted when they disclosed than when they did not. Similarly, Chelune (1976) found that females who disclosed in a conversation with a stranger were liked more than nondisclosing females, but disclosing males were liked less than those who disclosed very little.

Consistent with the disclosure appropriateness notion, other researchers have found that this receptiveness of female self-disclosure seems to be limited to topics that are deemed consistent with the female sex role. Kleinke and Kahn (1980) found, for example, that women were liked more when they talked about personal emotional experiences, but were liked

less when they talked about personal aggressiveness. Derlega, Durham, Gockel and Sholis (1981) found that women were less willing to discuss "masculine" aspects of themselves but more willing to disclose "feminine" aspects, as compared with males.

This research thus suggests that it may be seen as more appropriate for a female to disclose personal information than for a male, as long as that self-disclosure is consistent with the generally held role of women in this society. When applied to political speakers, it might be speculated that self-disclosure by a female might not be seen as inappropriate, particularly for the type of personal disclosure used in the Burger and Vartabedian (1985) studies, as it is for a male speaker. If this is the case, then we would not expect the same decrease in persuasiveness with self-disclosure for a female political speaker as for a male speaker. On the other hand, little is known about the expectations for female politicians. Visibility of women in political office is still a fairly new phenomenon. Thus, another possibility is that the self-disclosure rules for female political speakers are similar to those for males. That is, Americans may expect their political officeholders, males and females, to act in a certain way that does not include high

levels of personal disclosure. If that is the case, then the same decrease with self-disclosure uncovered for male political officeholders should also be found for females. These two possibilities were examined in Experiment 1.

Method

Subjects Seventy-five male and seventy-seven female undergraduates served as subjects in exchange for class credit in their introductory psychology course.

Procedure Subjects participated in the experiment in groups of about 20. It was explained that the experiment concerned their perceptions of a speech that they would read. The experimenter then distributed booklets which randomly assigned subjects to one of eight experimental conditions. On the cover sheet of the booklet, half of the subjects read that they would be reading a transcript of a speech delivered by a member of an Oratory and Address Society in a far-away city. The other half read that the speech was by a member of the U. S. House of Representatives delivered in front of this same oratory club. The congressperson was said to represent the district including the same far-away city. In addition, for half of the subjects the speaker was identified at several points as a male, Robert Wallace. For the other half the speaker was

identified as a female, Roberta Wallace.

All subjects then read one of two speeches. The speeches were taken verbatim from those used in the Burger and Vartabedian (1985) research. Each subject read a persuasive speech arguing in favor of establishing a federal program of catastrophic medical insurance. Half of the subjects read a speech that ended with the speaker describing how his or her own family had suffered from a catastrophic illness. The other half read a speech which ended with the same story about the suffering family, but the family was identified as one the speaker had read about. Thus, because the gender of the subject also was identified, a 2 X 2 X 2 X 2 factorial design was created with the following variables: Club Member-Congressperson Speaker, Male-Female Speaker, Disclosing-Nondisclosing Speech, and Male-Female Subject.

Subjects then completed a questionnaire concerning their impressions of the speech and the speaker. Included in the items on this questionnaire were 11-point items asking the subject to indicate the extent to which he or she agreed with the speaker, the extent to which he or she felt the speaker had revealed personal information, and the extent to which the story at the end of the speech seemed appropriate.

Results and Discussion

All measures originally were analyzed within a four-way ANOVA. However, because the subject gender variable failed to reveal any significant effects on any of the measures, this variable was dropped from the analyses. Thus, the measures were examined within a 2 (Club Member-Congressperson) by 2 (Male-Female Speaker) by 2 (Disclosure-No Disclosure) ANOVA.

An examination of the two manipulation-check items suggests that the manipulations were successful. First, there was a significant main effect for the Disclosure-No Disclosure variable on the item asking subjects the extent to which they felt the speaker had revealed personal information, $F(1,143) = 37.8$ $p < .0001$, with subjects in the Disclosure condition finding the speaker more disclosing than those in the No Disclosure condition. No other significant effects emerged for this item. Next, there was a significant interaction between the Club Member-Congressperson variable and the Disclosure-No Disclosure variable on the item asking subjects about the level of appropriateness of the closing story, $F(1,143) = 3.39$ $p < .02$. Consistent with earlier research, subjects found the disclosing speech by the congressperson less appropriate than the nondisclosing speech, and the opposite pattern was found

for the club member. It is important to note there was no significant difference in this pattern for the male and female speaker. Thus, the rules of disclosure appropriateness for males and females do not appear to differ in this situation.

The major dependent variable was the extent to which subjects agreed with the speaker's position. A significant interaction between the Club Member-Congressperson variable and the Disclosure-No Disclosure variable was found for this item, $F(1,143) = 7.73$, $p < .006$. As shown in Table 1, agreement with the club member increased with the self-disclosure, but agreement with the congressperson decreased with the disclosure. No other significant effects emerged in this analysis. Thus, the pattern of effects found in the earlier research appears to have been replicated for both male and female political speakers.

Table 1 About Here

To test this further, 2 (Club Member-Congressperson) by 2 (Disclosure-No Disclosure) ANOVAs were conducted separately for the male and female speaker conditions. For the male speaker, a significant interaction emerged, $F(1,67) = 4.13$, $P < .05$, thus replicating the effect. The same interaction was found

for the female speaker condition, but fell slightly short of statistical significance, $F(1,76) = 3.62$, $p < .06$.

The findings thus seem to fairly clearly suggest that the same decrease in persuasiveness with disclosure that was found for male political speakers in this and earlier research also is found for female political officeholders. The college students in this sample appeared to see self-disclosure of one's family problems as appropriate for a club member speaking before his or her organization, but inappropriate for a member of Congress speaking before this same group. The rule seems to hold for both males and females. Thus, when the congressperson engaged in inappropriate disclosure, his or her ability to persuade the students was lessened.

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 was designed to test an alternate interpretation for the findings reported in Experiment 1 and in the Burger and Vartabedian (1985) studies. That is, in all of this research, the disclosing congressperson who told about his or her family was creating a different image of himself or herself than the congressperson who did not reveal this information. Because the disclosing speaker told about a family with

health, alcohol and psychological problems, the audience's image of him or her may have changed not because of the self-disclosure, but rather because of the new information they now had about him or her. Perhaps a congressperson from such a background is given less credit or less respect than the nondisclosing congressperson. Thus, the act of self-disclosure and the amount of knowledge the subject had about the speaker in these studies were, as in most self-disclosure studies, confounded.

The present investigation was designed to unconfound these variables and thereby to test the two interpretations of the phenomenon. A condition was added to the Burger and Vartabedian (1985) design in which subjects were given the information that the disclosing speaker adds to his speech, but this information does not come from the speaker himself. Other subjects heard this information as disclosed by the speaker or received neither self-disclosure nor information. If the congressman's persuasiveness decreases when subjects know about his background in the absence of self-disclosure, then the appropriateness-of-disclosure explanation is not supported. If, however, persuasiveness decreases only when the congressperson engages in an act of self-disclosure and not when

subjects only have additional information about him, then the explanation proposed by Burger and Vartabedian (1985) will gain additional support.

Method

Subjects. One hundred nineteen undergraduates, 47 males and 72 females, served as subjects in exchange for class credit.

Procedure. Subjects participated in the experiment in groups. The experimenter explained that he was interested in better understanding how public speakers are perceived by an audience. It was explained that subjects would be shown a short videotape of a speech and that they would be asked to give their impressions of the speech immediately afterward.

The experimenter then described the speaker as either a member of an oratory club in a city not near the university (Club Member condition) or as a member of the U. S. House of Representatives from the same far-away city (Congressman condition). It was explained in all conditions that the speaker was speaking before an Oratory and Address Society.

Subjects then were shown one of three versions of the same videotaped speech of a mid-30's male speaker used by Burger and Vartabedian (1985). In the Disclosure condition the speaker ended his speach with a

story about how his family had been victimized by catastrophic illness. In the No Disclosure condition the speech ended with the same story, but the speaker described the people as a family that he had heard about recently. Finally, in the Knowledge condition, the subjects did not hear the story that ended the speech. Instead the experimenter read to the subjcts about the speaker's background, and told the same story about the speaker heard in the Disclosure condition.

All subjects then were presented with a short questionnaire which asked the subject to respond to several items on 11-point scales. The first item on the questionnaire asked subjects the extent to which they agreed with the speaker's position on the issue. Other items asked how knowledgeable they believed the speaker to be, how disclosing the speaker had been, the extent to which they believed the speaker to hold a position of respect and authority, and the extent to which the content of the speech had been appropriate for the speaker and the situation.

Results and Discussion

As in the earlier research, initial analyses indicated that the sex of the subject did not significantly affect any of the research findings. Therefore, this variable was collapsed for the final

data analyses, in which the questionnaire items were analyzed within 2 (Congressman-Club Member Speaker) by 3 (Disclosure-No Disclosure-Knowledge Speech) ANOVAs.

First, the effectiveness of the manipulations was examined. Subjects were asked to indicate the extent to which they believed the speaker had disclosed intimate information during the speech. A significant main effect for Speech was found for this variable, $F(2,113) = 16.24$, $p < .001$. Subjects in the Disclosure condition ($M = 6.50$) believed the speaker disclosed more than did subjects in the No Disclosure ($M = 4.28$) and Knowledge ($M = 3.54$) conditions, $p < .05$, Newman-Keuls test. Subjects also were asked the extent to which they believed the speaker held a position of respect and authority. A main effect for Speaker was found, $F(1,113) = 17.55$, $p < .001$, with subjects in the Congressman condition ($M = 6.54$) believing the speaker was in such a position more than subjects in the Club Member condition ($M = 4.98$). No other significant effects emerged on these two items. Thus, the manipulations appeared to have been successful.

The main dependent measure asked subjects the extent to which they agreed with the speaker. A significant interaction was found for this item, $F(2,113) = 4.83$, $p < .01$. As shown in Table 2, the

persuasiveness of the club member did not differ across the three speech conditions. However, subjects in the Congressman-Disclosure condition found the speaker significantly less persuasive than did the subjects in the other two Congressman conditions, $p < .05$, Newman-Keuls comparisons. Thus, in addition to replicating the earlier findings, it was found that the decrease in the congressman's persuasiveness occurred only when he self-disclosed and not when subjects only knew about his background.

Table 2 About Here

Subjects also were asked the extent to which they believed the speaker was knowledgable about the topic. Only a main effect for Speech was found, $F(2,113) = 7.84$, $p < .001$. Both the Disclosure ($M = 7.33$) and the Knowledge ($M = 7.59$) speeches were seen as coming from a more knowledgeable speaker than the No Disclosure speech ($M = 5.72$). Finally, subjects were asked the extent to which the content of the speech was appropriate. Although the interaction effect for this item fell short of significance, $p < .28$, a planned comparison between the Congressman-Disclosure condition ($M = 5.09$) and the Congressman-No Disclosure ($M = 6.29$) and Congressman-Knowledge ($M = 6.67$) conditions reveals a significant

difference, $t(51) = 2.18$, $p < .05$.

The findings thus replicate the earlier results and provide additional support for the appropriateness-of-disclosure interpretation of this phenomenon. Whereas self-disclosure did not affect the persuasiveness of the club member's speech, subjects who saw a "congressman" disclose intimate information were less likely to agree with the speaker's position than if the congressman had not disclosed. Most important, when subjects were informed about the congressman's background there was no decline in persuasiveness relative to the nondisclosing speaker. Thus, it is not the additional information about the congressman that is responsible for his decreased persuasiveness, rather it appears to be something about the act of disclosing itself.

General Discussion

The results of the two experiments reported here help to clarify two of the questions concerning the decrease in persuasiveness found when political officeholders use public self-disclosure. The effect appears to hold for female as well as male speakers. In addition, there appears to be something about the act of disclosure itself, not just the information gained from the disclosure, that is responsible for the effect.

The two replications of the effect provided here

also suggest the robustness of the finding. However, there remain many questions about the conditions under which the effect occurs and some of the reasons for it. One of the remaining questions concerns the specific content of the disclosure used in this research. In each of the studies finding this effect thus far, subjects heard about a rather negative self-disclosure--troubles in the speaker's family from the catastrophic illness. What is not clear is if a different story, perhaps one emphasizing something positive about the speaker, would produce the same effect. It is possible that Americans do not consider disclosure about positive features of their political officeholders to be as inappropriate as the disclosure of negative information.

Of course, more research also needs to be directed at pinning down the causes for the officeholder's decline in persuasiveness with self-disclosure. Burger and Vartabedian (1985) have described the perceived inappropriateness of the self-disclosure. As research on interpersonal interactions (e.g., Wortman, Adesman, Herman & Greenberg, 1976) suggests, inappropriate self-disclosure can result in negative reactions to the discloser. In the political sphere, Americans generally hold their elected representatives in high regard (e.g., Greenstein, 1965). The failure to behave in a manner

expected of an elected official may create negative feelings or impressions that interfere with the speaker's ability to persuade the audience.

Although the results of the present research are consistent with this analysis, the exact variable(s) mediating the speaker's decline in persuasiveness remains elusive. For example, does the perceived inappropriateness of the congressperson's disclosure lead to a decline in credibility and therefore a decline in persuasiveness? Two items examined in Experiment 2 argue against this. First, subjects' perceptions of the extent to which the speaker held a position of respect and authority did not differ across Congressman conditions. Second, if credibility is described as knowledgeability, it was found that subjects in the Congressman-Disclosure and Congressman-Knowledge conditions did not differ in perceived knowledgeability. These speakers were seen as more knowledgeable than the No Disclosure speaker who had not gone through the experience. Other possibilities include detrimental changes in the disclosing congressperson's image and the creation of negative feelings generated when expectancies for this person's behavior are violated. Continued efforts to determine how perceived inappropriateness leads to a decrease in persuasiveness

should provide information of practical as well as theoretical importance.

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Table 1

Mean Agreement with the Speaker's Position--Experiment 1

	Male Speaker		Female Speaker	
	Disclosure	No Disclosure	Disclosure	No Disclosure
Club Member	8.59	7.81	8.55	7.87
Congressperson	7.65	8.75	7.06	7.95

Note. The higher the score the more subjects agreed with the speaker.

Table 2

Mean Agreement with Speakers's Position--Experiment 2

	Speech Condition		
	Disclosure	No Disclosure	Knowledge
Club Member	7.67	7.77	7.11
Congressperson	6.05	8.14	8.22

Note. The higher the score the more subjects agreed with the speaker.